

Alice in Wonderland a fun tradition

■by Angle Stroud

"I remember laughing loud and long," says Jean Jackson as she reminisces on the first time she saw the Meredith faculty's special version of *Alice in Wonderland* while a freshman at Meredith.

Every four years the Meredith faculty performs the play and has done so since 1924. The program explains that the production is for "The amusement and bewilderment of the students," says Helena Allen, director of the play.

Gertrude Royster, director of Physical Education from 1906 to 1941, came up with the idea.

Elizabeth Delia Dixon Carroll, the college physician, had ordered a quarantine because of a flu epidemic, so Royster decided to have the faculty do the play to entertain the students who were bored from having to stay on campus.

"It was such a howling success that they decided to do *Alice in Wonderland* every four years," explains Dorothy Merritt, niece of Royster and member of the class of 1933.

The night of the production holds as many surprises for the cast as it does for the students. This aspect of the production has existed since its conception.

According to Mary Lynch Johnson's *A History of Meredith College*, during the production of 1924, everyone was shocked when Lois Johnson, a faculty member playing the Queen of Hearts, left her fingerprints on the cheek of Academic Dean Boomhour, who was playing the King of Hearts when she slapped him. In the rehearsals, "she had merely feigned the blow." (p. 170)

The spontaneity which has come to be a long-standing tradition of the production, often turns into a game of payback for the cast members.

One year the Mad Hatter decided to try to throw Alice off guard when he added to his lines in an address to her, "you sexy *thann*g." Four years later, Alice got the Mad Hatter back with an unexpected fire from a water-gun.

As the 1988 performance will be her last before she retires, Allen has asked Jean Jackson, English professor, to be the assistant director so that she can become director in 1992. Jackson, first-time assistant director, says that "It's a lot of fun to put the production on, and I say that with anticipation." (Her face turns red as she laughs.) It takes a lot of hard work and there are a lot of lines to be memorized.

A few years ago Dean Burris was having trouble memorizing his lines and had to resort to pasting them on the back of his shield. Norma Rose, English professor, proclaimed that had he been required to memorize and recite literature lines while in college he would have no trouble with his *Alice in Wonderland* lines.

Not only does the faculty have to work hard in getting the production ready for the stage, but they take a great deal of pride and seriousness in the production.

Allen told of an episode several years ago when a new instructor in the Music Department failed to memorize all of his assigned lines. Many of the other cast members became angry with him for not learning his lines, and the new instructor replied in shock over their scorn, "Damn, they are really serious about this play."

"At dress rehearsal, people are staggering around feeling that it is going to be a disaster, but it always goes off wonderfully," said Bernie Cochran, Religion Professor.

The production "uses the talents and would-be talents of faculty members," explained Jackson while laughing.

Alice in Wonderland affords the faculty members with an opportunity to "goof off" said lone Knight, English professor. It also provides the faculty with a means to get to know one another better and outside of the faculty meeting situation. This becomes more of a benefit as the faculty continues to grow.

"*Alice* builds a more cohesive faculty just as Comhuskin' builds class unity," Jackson said.

Anticipation from both faculty and students builds as the performance time draws near since the play is produced only once every four years, explained Jackson. "The performance brings out the impishness of the faculty," added Jackson.

A lot of the fun of *Alice in Wonderland* was how the characters had parts either totally out of character or parts that fitted them to a tee, said Merritt.

Mary Lynch Johnson played the Cheshire Cat for many years. After Alice recites a long and complicated poem, the Cheshire Cat is quick to comment, "It's every bit wrong." This would always bring down the house said Cochran. Since Johnson loved cats but would never be so blunt about a student's work, the part both was opposite yet seemed appropriate, said Knight.

There are no auditions for the play, however faculty members are often pegged for a particular role in the production. "Once you are asked to do a part, saying 'no' is not an option," explains Betty Brewer, English Professor.

Last fall, almost two years before the 1988 production, members of the English Department were attending a poetry reading at the Museum of Art and among the conversation topics was talk of what new faculty members should be cast for particular roles in the production.

For students, part of the real fun of *Alice in Wonderland* is that the casting of parts is kept secret by the faculty. Even the program given out the night of the performance does not identify which faculty member has which part.

Once the cast does come onto stage, you cannot tell who the characters are until they first speak because of their elaborate costumes and makeup, explained Brewer.

The next production of *Alice in Wonderland* is scheduled for February 4 at 8pm in Jones Auditorium. The production is open only to Meredith students because of limited space in the auditorium.

Allen says that the faculty had considered doing the production twice in February and to invite anyone from the community to attend. It was decided, however, that doing the performance twice would take away from the spontaneity. "No one in the community needs to see our faculty making fools of themselves," said Brewer.

When asked what advice she would give students to prepare themselves for *Alice in Wonderland*, Jackson said, "Come expecting to be surprised, expecting to be entertained, expecting to leave with fuller perspectives of your professors and plenty of ammunition to use later."



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